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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines seven specific areas that parents should examine when visiting a prospective child care center for their child. Parents should examine: (1) the center's staff; (2) the center's parent relations; (3) the physical and teaching environment; (4) the curriculum; (5) staff-child interaction; (6) the administration; and (7) their child's view of the center. Each category contains specific questions that parents should ask themselves and ask the staff of a prospective day care center. (MDM)

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HOW TO PICK A

DAY CARE CENTER

BY

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A paper Presented at the Fitchburg State College

Time for a Change Parent/Neighborhood

Conference

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COMMON DILEMMAS

Eileen, married 15 years, left the workforce at the birth of her son Daniel four years ago. She was gainfully employed as a public school teacher. She is now is thirty years old and ready to return to the workforce in her local community as a public school para-professional. What does she do with Daniel?

Valerie is a twenty year old wife of a military husband and mother of Adam. She is enrolled in her local community college to pursue a business degree. Adam cannot attend classes with her. Is day care the answer for three year old Adam?

Mary Jane is a single parent provider for twins, Joseph and Michael. Mary Jane has an evening job in a local nursing home. Mary Jane's parents assisted evenings with the care of the children during the first two years of their life. Mary Jane must now work the day shift and assume a new position with more money. Her parents cannot help with the child care because of their work schedule. What are Mary Jane's alternatives?

Ray, divorced, is a forty year old with custody of his two daughters, Wendy, age 6, and Laura, age 8. Ray is an executive in a high techniology firm. The children are enrolled in public school. What will Ray do for child care assistance before and after school?

Do these scenarios sound familiar? All of tese individuals are faced with a growing dilemma--the NEED and DESIRE to work --and the WORRIES of quality care for their young children.

THE NATIONAL SITUATION

Thirty years ago, day care was considered a necessary evil at best and at its worst it was seen to some as the equivalent of placing a child in an institution. The number of working mothers in the United States has increased tremendously. Near 31 million mothers work outside their homes with full-time or part-time jobs(Statistical Abstracts of USA, 1990). Approximately 50 percent of America's school children under the age of five are in day-care facilities part-time or full-time (Caldwell, 1984). As more and more families search for child care, they find the solutions to their problems is the use of some kind of day care!

YOUR SITUATION

As a parent considering day care, you have strong concerns about the quality of care for your child. You are well aware that a program's environment has a tremendous effect on the way your child may learn and develop. All day care programs are not alike. The size of the program, the ratio of caregivers and children, the consistency of care, and the physical safety vary widely. Although no paper can make you an expert of childcare, this one is intended to help you sort the important issues in selecting a

prospective day care environment for your child.

THE SPECIAL QUALITIES OF GOOD CHILD CARE CENTERS

Finding affordable, convenient, and quality day care can take a lot of time. What is the best way to begin?

- Ask other parents in the community where they send their kids.
- Talk to school counselors and your local clergy.
- Telephone area providers. Ask to speak with the director. Describe what you are looking for and set up an appointment to visit the centers in your area.
- Request written literature or pamphlets on the center.

WHEN YOU VISIT

When you visit, the director and staff will often provide you with a handbook of informations and regulations about the center, the costs, the hours of operation, medical and insurance policies, pick-up penalties, experience of caregivers, curriculum plans, etc. You could be overwhelmed and may not know what to look for when you visit.

Will this be that SPECIAL environment where the miracle and wonder of development of your little on is best appreciated? You will most likely be struck by the distinct atmosphere that characterizes the center. Is it a sunny, warm, nurturing environment with a friendly, supportive, and congenial staff? Naturally, you will be watching for that primary ingredient that helps children flourish-- loving, responsive caregivers. yet, this alone should NOT be the only quality you should look for in a day care center. The relationship with you as parent, the curriculum, and the administration of the center are also important factors.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Research confirms and commonsense underscores the importance of having objective criteria when making the decision on what is best four child's long--term development. The following are seven "SPECIAL LOOK FORS " when visiting a child care center.

1. STAFF

What experience have the staff had and what training do they receive? Do they demonstrate appropriate personal characterristics for working with young children? The program should be staffed by individuals at least eighteen years old.

Don't be afraid to ask the director about the length of service of staff members. Child care work is among the country's top job categories with the highest employee turnovers (Whitebock, M., 1982). The result is that many programs experience constant strain as they search for and retain new staff. Contonuity of childcare givers is important for young children. Why allow your child to make attachments with people that may soon make a career move? A veteran staff is a SPECIAL quality sign.

Better day care centers can boast professional and personal growth for their employees. Staff in SPECIAL child care centers have apportunities to attend workshops, seminars, inservice sessions, make visits to other child care programs, or enroll in college level courses. A staff should be continually and adequately oriented in child growth and development, guidance and discipline techniques, relations with families, curriculum planning, and signs of child abuse.

2. PARENT RELATIONS

Does the center offer special means to communicate with parents? Are there day-to-day or week-to-week happenings that are shared? Are the conferences held to discuss the children's progress, accomplishments, dificulties at home and at the center?

It is important for staff and parents to communicate in regard to home rearing practices in order to minimize conflicts. SPECIAL centers are alive with information bulletin boards, frequent notes, telephone calls, and newsletters. Family members are encouraged to be involved when possible.

3. ENVIRONMENT

Are the indoor and outdoor environments safe, clean, attractive and spacious? In SPECIAL centers, the facility is cleaned daily. All equipment is maintained in a safe clean condition. The rooms are well lighted, ventilated, and free from hidden dangers of toxic materials. It is important that the center is in compliance with local health board regulations.

The spacial arrangement of a center can hinder or help young children. Play areas should be clearly defined where children can work individually, together in small groups, or in a large group. SPECIAL centers offer children a wide variety of indoor and outdoor physical activities.

During your visit,you will see children who are working in the learning centers or in small groups on projects. Notice if child care worker is free to work with individual children.

Does the center se developmentally appropriate teaching methods to individualise instruction? Are there abundant choices for real, hands-on, age-appropriate, activities (clay, water, sand, paint, blocks, puzzles,games, recordings, dramatic props, wind-up

toys)? Materials should be on open shelves so children can select what they need.

Special opportunities for looking at and reading books and comfortable areas for quiet book play will be visible.

Does the outdoor play area provide shade, open space, a variety of equipment for riding, climbing, balancing, trike riding, swinging, jumping, pretend play? Is the area protected from dangerous traffic?

4. CURRICULUM.

A SPECIAL program includes thinking activities,creative, aesthetic activities, poems, rhyms, songs, dancing, and clapping. Does this practical curriculum exist for the children?

As a parent you should be assured that a daily schedule is planned with a balance of activities. Some of these should include:

. Indoor/ outdoor play
. Quiet/active play
. Individual, small, and large group play
. Child initiated activities
. Staff initiated activities
. Developmentally appropriate materials
. Self-control development
. Social skills
. Reasoning
. Thinking
. Experimenting
. Language development
. Special events

5. INTERACTION

Staff-child interaction is an important factor. Watch the children. Are they greeted warmly and personally when they arrive and leave the SPECIAL center? Are staff available and responsive to children, encouraging them to share experiences? Does the staff speak with children in a positive courteous way? Do child care workers have enough energy to respond to children's needs, comforts and questions? is it clear that this SPECIAL place has comfortable child-child and adult-child interactions?

A SPECIAL staff uses positive techniques of guidance. Children are given educational options. A few positive rules are set. Children are expected to gain increasing control of their own behaviours. Rules are realistic and designed to promote cooperative and respectful behaviours among children.

6. ADMINISTRATION

Does the center have written policies and procedures for operation? The SPECIAL center maintains accident and liability insurance coverage for children.

Does the SPECIAL center makes use of community social services, mental and physical health agencies, and educational programs at museums, libraries and neighborhood centers?

Are there regular staff meetings for program planning and updating on individual children? Does the director evaluate staff members annually? Are the programs' effectiveness in meeting children's needs evaluated by parents?

7. LOGIC.

Let's not forget logic. Our children will tell us what they love about a day care center (making friends, a special teacher etc.) and hate (the warm milk at snack time, no wood working, no pets, etc.). The children give us the criteria for a SPECIAL CENTER. Why not listen to them? As you become familiar with the centers and use this simple screening questions, you will logically pick one that is best for you and that offers optimal care for you SPECIAL person.

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